

# **INHERITING Peace**

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*For anyone needing a little more peace in this Christmas season.*

## chapter one



IT'S NOT every day a girl gets invited to the Thanksgiving dinner of a relative she's never met *and* inherits an inn.

And it's not every day that the girl decides to uproot her entire life for the opportunity to run said inn.

That only happens in the movies. It's not real life. Except here she was—Maggie Benson, the new owner of the Starlit Inn—trying not to fall through the rickety front porch steps.

An icy breeze lifted the ends of her dark burgundy hair and tossed it in her eyes. Shivering, she risked pulling her hands from her coat pocket to grip the railing. It wobbled under her weight as she took the next few steps. Luckily, she missed the sagging parts of the stairs and made it across the porch to the front door.

So far, so good.

Taking a deep breath, she dug the key from her pocket and slid it into the lock. After a few moments of finagling the key, the lock clicked, and she pushed open the large, wooden door. Damp, musty air tickled her nose. She cleared her throat.

Was it possible for a house to be even colder inside than it was outside? Maggie shivered and heaved the door closed before shoving her hands back into her pockets.

Heat. She needed heat and fast. But where was the thermostat? A quick survey of the large lobby revealed nothing

but a chilly, worn room with outdated furniture and an enormous stone fireplace. The hearth had seen better days—but the same could be said for Maggie. The only highlight that lifted her spirits was the high wooden beams running along the ceiling. It gave her hope that this room *could* be beautiful.

She pulled her jacket tighter and went to the counter. Dust coated the countertop, except for the space in the middle where a manila envelope sat with her name scribbled on top.

The estate lawyer must have left it for her. Hopefully, it was a detailed report from the previous owner. Perhaps they also included a how-to manual about operating this place. Maggie eagerly opened the envelope, but the only contents were two sheets of paper.

So much for help getting started.

The first page was a brief letter from the lawyer congratulating Maggie on the new ownership and wishing her luck on her turnkey new adventure. At the bottom of the page, handwritten in a messy script, was a note. “Your first guests arrive on December twentieth. I will email you a copy of the reservations on file.”

Guests already? Maggie took another look at the room and frowned. She was led to believe the Inn was in great shape, but this place was far from ready for guests—especially at Christmas. Lodgers would want something warm and inviting. Something homey and magical.

Maggie frowned at the word *magical*. Actually, that was the last thing Rose told her before she left the very weird and awkward Thanksgiving dinner. “*Maggie, dear, the Starlit Inn is a magical place where anything can happen.*”

Unfortunately for the Starlit Inn, it looked as though magic was far from reality. Not that the place couldn’t become beautiful. Maggie could imagine an oversized Christmas tree in the lobby, decked out with homemade ornaments, and lit up with white twinkling lights. Candles flickering in the windows and garland hanging on the mantle.

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“I think it’s going to take a lot more than magic to make this place presentable.”

“Excuse me, Miss?”

Maggie dropped the papers on the counter and spun to find an older man holding a clipboard.

He gave her a sheepish look. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you, but your door was open.”

She lowered her arm, willing her heartbeat to return to normal. “But I closed it.”

The man chuckled. “Sometimes old doors don’t stay latched very well. I can fix that.”

“I’m sorry—who are you?” Maggie should be concerned, but the man had kind eyes and a grandfatherly tone to his voice. What she wouldn’t give to have had a grandparent growing up.

“I’m Walter. I was hired to fix your archway at the end of the driveway.”

“Oh, that’s right. I didn’t realize you were coming today.” Maggie straightened the papers from the lawyer and turned to the second page, which had today’s date and time for the repairs. Heat warmed her face as she walked around the counter and held out her hand. “I’m Maggie Benson.”

He shook her hand. “Pleased to meet you, Miss Benson.”

“Likewise.” She cleared her throat again, wishing she had her water bottle handy. “So, you’re going to fix the broken bricks of the archway?”

Walter glanced at his clipboard. “I have a couple of men coming to help with the archway and wooden sign, and we’ll look at the boiler.” He paused. “It’s old, but I’m sure we can get this place warmed up. In the meantime, I can start a fire for you.”

A wave of relief washed over her. “Thank you so much. That would be wonderful.”

“Don’t want you to catch a chill, so I’ll get started in here.”

“Sounds good.” Maggie watched for a few minutes as the man set down his toolbox and arranged the wood inside the fireplace. He then meandered back to the front desk. Antique mailboxes

lined the wall behind the counter, with skeleton keys dangling from a hook in each box. She scanned the rooms and found one labeled *Maggie* on the bottom right. Touched that someone thought to change the name on the innkeeper's slot, she reached for the key and slipped it into her pocket.

Now to find her new room.

New room—new life—new everything.

A tiny thrill fluttered in her stomach at the idea of exploring the Inn. A doorway to the left of the front desk led to a simple sitting room with bookshelves and tables. She could envision guests reading or playing games. Perhaps sipping coffee, hot chocolate, and enjoying homemade cookies. Maggie made a mental note to add an inviting coffee nook to the space. She opened the only door in the room and found a collection of coats and snow boots. She'd have to clean those out to fit in some board games.

To the right of the front counter, the stairs led to the second floor, but she passed those, instead walking down a short hallway. A guest bathroom sat at the end of the corridor, and to its left was a small but efficient kitchen with a door that led to the basement. One look at the creepy, steep stairs, and she promptly closed the door.

To the right of the bathroom was a charming eating area. More wooden beams graced the ceiling, and large full-length windows covered the right side of the room. A magnificent view of the mountains and woods caught her eye, but she forced herself to turn away and continue investigating the Inn.

Maggie figured her room would be on the first floor, but perhaps it was upstairs. She made her way back down the hallway and to the mahogany staircase. Worn carpet graced each step. The best part of the entire stairway was what appeared to be a hand-carved railing. It was dusty, but Maggie couldn't resist running her fingers along the stunning craftsmanship.

At the top of the landing was a beautiful bay window and a cushioned seat, adorned with built-in bookcases on each side. But

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that's where the charm ended. Everywhere else had chipped paint or outdated wallpaper. The carpet was musty and worn thin from years of use. And the bedrooms weren't much better. Most had double beds with dark green and brown comforters and a hodgepodge of furniture. Two accommodations boasted king-size beds.

Some rooms shared a small bathroom, while the king suites—if you could call them that—had a sofa couch and a tiny kitchenette made up of a sink and microwave above.

A glimmer of silver from the sofa caught her eye. Was that a spring poking through the cushion?

Worry knotted her stomach. This was going to take more money than she'd been led to believe. Turnkey ready? Ha. What was she going to do? And how was she going to run this whole place by herself? She had planned to hire help and offer room and board as a salary bonus. But it looked like she was going to have to deplete most of her savings to bring the Inn up to industry standards.

A crackle and pop sounded from below. Was that the fire?

Maggie made her way back downstairs and grinned. Walter had indeed got the fire going. The chill in the room subsided, and with the glow of the fire, her excitement returned. Maggie could almost forget all the problems looming over her head.

“Miss Maggie, that old boiler is being stubborn. I couldn't get it going.”

So, she could *almost* forget all her problems. *Please don't say it's going to cost a lot of money.*

“I need to go into town and get a few different parts. It may take me a day or two, but I promise I'll get it up and running.”

“But it is fixable, right?”

Walter chuckled. “It's almost as old as I am, but I can get it working again. Don't worry.” He nodded to the fireplace. “That should keep you warm enough until it's ready. The news isn't calling for more snow for another week or so.”

Right in time for Christmas. Maggie smiled. A tiny flicker of hope sparked. “Thank you. I really appreciate you working on it.”

“It’s no problem at all. I’m just glad to see this old place up and running again. The Starlit Inn always made Christmas so special.” Walter’s face lit up with a grin. “The Starlit always had a Christmas activity planned. Cookie decorating, a toy drive, Christmas dinner. The whole community came out all month long.”

“That seems like a tall order, but I’ll definitely try.” Maggie tried not to think about how much of a task it would be to restore the Inn’s reputation.

Walter grew thoughtful for a moment and finally nodded. “Well, something tells me you’re up for the challenge.” He walked over and patted her shoulder. “I’m going to head to town and look for those parts. I’ll come back by after I find them.”

Tears threatened at his kind words, but she blinked them away. “Thank you.”

“You bet.” He moved to the door and, with a big tug, pulled it open. “I’ll fix that, too, but in the meantime, make sure you lock it.”

“I will.”

The heavy front door firmly closed, and Maggie blew out a deep breath. Now what?

There was so much to do and so little time. But first, there was still the tiny matter of finding her bedroom. Surely it was in the Inn. It wouldn’t be in another building, would it? She stuck her hands out closer to the fire and warmed them.

What if it was in the basement with the boiler?

Shaking her head, she dismissed that thought. Why would someone build this Inn and put the owner’s room in the basement? That made no sense.

The most likely case was that she just missed the room upstairs. It probably wasn’t labeled like the other rooms.

Satisfied, she turned her attention to another set of built-ins surrounding the fireplace. A mixture of hardback books and

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paperbacks lined the shelves, and Maggie couldn't wait to browse the titles.

A chain exactly like the ones on the room keys hung around a notch on the face of the shelf, about halfway down. Curious, Maggie reached for the chain to remove it, and a metal faceplate moved, revealing a keyhole.

No. It couldn't be.

Could it?

Maggie pulled the antique key from her pocket, inserted it, and turned. The locking mechanism clicked, and the bookcase gently swung open.

## about the author



Erin R. Howard is the award-winning fantasy author of *Window of Time* and the Acquisitions Editor for Expanse Books, an imprint of Scrivenings Press. Her other titles include *The Kalila Chronicles* (YA urban fantasy) and *The Gates of Deceit* (dystopian) series.

When she's not writing or editing, Erin loves playing video games with her husband, watching movies with her children, and fueling her many craft addictions. Erin has a Creative Writing degree and is a member of Realm Makers, RagTag Writers, and Once Upon a Page. She resides in Western Kentucky with her husband and three children.